



SPEECH BY
DATO SERI PADUKA AWANG HAJI AHMAD
BIN PEHIN ORANG KAYA LAILA SETIA BAKTI DI-RAJA DATO LAILA
UTAMA HAJI AWANG ISA
PRESIDENT OF THE LAW SOCIETY OF BRUNEI DARUSSALAM
ON THE OPENING OF THE LEGAL YEAR
THURSDAY, 22nd JANUARY 2026

My Lord Chief Justice Dato Seri Paduka Steven Chong,

Yang Berhormat Pehin Datu Lailaraja Major General (Rtd) Dato Paduka Seri Haji Awang Halbi bin Haji Mohd Yussof, Minister at the Prime Minister's Office

Honourable Attorney General, Datin Seri Paduka Dyg Hjh Nor Hashimah binti Hj Mohammad Taib,

Yang Amat Arif Chief Syar'ie Judge,

Honourable Justices of the Supreme Court, Judges,

Excellencies,

My Learned Friends from the Legal Profession, Members of the Bar,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

INTRODUCTION

1. A very good morning to all. It is a pleasure and honour to write this speech for this distinguished occasion as the President of the Law Society of Brunei Darussalam for the term 2026/2027 although I regret that I am unable to be at this important ceremony to deliver this speech in person. My sincere thanks go to my Vice-President, Mr On Hung Zheng, who has very kindly taken on the task of addressing you on my behalf.
2. Before I carry on, I wish to extend a warm welcome to all our overseas guests who have taken the time to attend this event today: -
 - a. Mr Daniel Koh, Vice President of the Law Society of Singapore,
 - b. Mr Henry Tan Shiu Hee, Honorary Secretary of the Advocates Association of Sarawak,
 - c. Datuk Mohamed Nazim Maduarin, President of the Sabah Law Society; and
 - d. Mr Amirali Nasir, Vice President of the Law Society of Hong Kong.

THE PAST TERM

3. To begin with, I would like to first thank and congratulate the 2024/2025 Council for all their hard work and dedication during their term in the face of novel challenges. Managing the affairs of a society is never easy, especially doing so while in active practice, and I commend the time and effort spent in this endeavour. Regardless of the challenges in the previous term, I believe there were valuable lessons learned and much was nonetheless achieved through the commitment and determination of all Council members – three of which I would like to highlight today.
4. Firstly, I applaud the previous Council for their persistent efforts in engaging with various governmental institutions for the betterment of the legal practice and public interest. A good example of this were the dialogue sessions between the Law Society and the Land Department which culminated in the entering into force of the Land Code amendments after many years. This is an important development to our land law, and one that hopefully brings more certainty and positive impact to the property sector. Besides this, the Law Society last term also met with several other external parties such as the Prisons Department, a member of the Legislative Council and remained committed to its work in the Judiciary-led Joint Legal Affairs Committee on important developments relevant to the practice of law.
5. Secondly, Council strengthened its regional and international ties by participating in several international conventions and concluded MOUs with foreign law associations and organisations. In particular,

MOUs have been signed with the Law Society of Singapore, the Bar Association of India and the Singapore Academy of Law. These partnerships are key in expanding opportunities for our members, promote professional exchange, and support continuing development in our legal landscape.

6. Third, the Law Society continued its support and investment in training and professional development. Advocacy training was conducted for UNISSA students by trained members of the Society, and mooting teams were once again subsidised to participate in the annual ECC-SAL Mooting Competition. These initiatives provide invaluable exposure and experience, particularly for younger members of the Bar.
7. The current Council shall build upon this foundation as we continue to strengthen the profession and the practice of law.

LOOKING FORWARD

8. Now, we must look to the future. This year marks the 20th anniversary of the Law Society of Brunei Darussalam. Over the past twenty years, the legal fraternity has grown in size, and the legal landscape remains ever changing in scope and complexity. At this milestone, and as a new President, I find it is timely to take a moment and reflect on the role of the Law Society, and on what members, the courts, and the public can reasonably expect of it.
9. For this, I turn to our establishing statute which sets out a number of specific purposes¹ of the Society. I do not intend on reciting them individually but taken together, they describe a professional body

¹ Section 4(1) Legal Profession (Law Society of Brunei Darussalam) Order, 2003

entrusted with the stewardship of the legal profession in the public interest. That stewardship requires the Society to set and safeguard professional standards, to nurture learning and ethical practice, to support its members and to promote access to justice.

10. Members of the Law Society and the public should therefore expect a society that is firm on standards and ethical conduct, supportive of its practitioners, conscious of its public responsibilities and constructive in its engagements with institutions of justice. In the face of such broad responsibility, this morning I will touch on three aspects of this duty, that I think are especially relevant for the term ahead.

Professional Credibility

11. The first purpose provided for in the Society's establishing statute is to "*maintain and improve the standards of conduct and learning of the legal profession in Brunei Darussalam*"². This is particularly important as the profession faces diminished public confidence in its members. Maintaining and improving standards of conduct is therefore vital in building public confidence and credibility. When the conduct of a few falls short of what is expected, it casts a shadow on the whole profession and we must, as a Society, renew our commitment to the upholding of professional and ethical standards and professionalism. Ultimately, the relationship between the courts, the legal profession, and the public is one that has trust at its core. That trust is built and maintained on competence, integrity, discipline and professional responsibility.
12. Where that trust is strained, we must respond, and course-correct for the betterment of the profession. The reality of legal practice today is that it is complex and demanding. Pressures of workload,

² Section 4(1)(a) Legal Profession (Law Society of Brunei Darussalam) Order, 2003

technological advancements, complexity of work and pace can test the professional judgment of even the best of us. Although such challenges undoubtedly place considerable strain on practitioners, they do not diminish the standards expected of the profession.

13. The Law Society will continue to play its part in discharging its statutory duty by regulating professional conduct, reinforcing standards, and ensuring accountability. But we must also recognise that maintaining standards require more than enforcement alone. It requires continuing education, guidance and a shared professional culture. In this regard, the Society reaffirms its commitment and participation in the Joint Legal Affairs Committee, in its efforts to improve codes of conduct and practice rules and the development of a continuing professional development programme. This is much welcomed in our shared goal of strengthening competence, reinforce ethical standards and support practitioners in meeting the responsibilities of practice.

Foreign Lawyers and the Strength of the Profession

14. This brings me to the second purpose I wanted to mention today related to the strength of the profession and practitioner support.
15. As mentioned earlier, maintaining and improving standards involves more than regulation alone. It also depends on guidance and mentorship. When I first entered private practice some 36 years ago, much of my own learning – and I am sure that of many senior members present today – was shaped by the foreign lawyers practising in Brunei at the time. Back then, foreign lawyers made up a significant part of the profession. That is no longer the case. Today, of the 174 members holding Practising Certificates, only 22 are foreign lawyers, representing approximately 13% of the Bar.

16. I raise this as a matter of perspective in light of recent sentiment and developments which may affect the ability of firms to attract and retain foreign practitioners. To this, I say that the Law Society recognises and values the contribution of its foreign lawyer members. Their presence does not displace local practitioners, nor does it overwhelm the profession. On the contrary, foreign practitioners often bring with them specialised experience and knowledge that support clients, firms and the community as a whole. In many cases, their contributions while working in Brunei enhance capacity, transfer knowledge, and strengthen the overall quality of legal services. Their contribution has also historically played a role in mentoring and professional development within the Bar and I believe continues to do so.
17. At the same time, it must be clearly understood that *all* practitioners, whether local or foreign, are held to the same high standards of professionalism, ethics and conduct. The value of diversity must always be paired by a shared commitment to integrity, responsibility and respect for the laws and institutions of Brunei Darussalam. Where these standards are met, diversity within the profession should be regarded as a strength, not a cause for concern.
18. Continuous learning should be a collective endeavour and the development and strengthening of the legal profession in Brunei cannot take place in a vacuum. Meaningful progress requires collaboration and engagement across institutions. When the profession advances together with other stakeholders, the result is not only a stronger profession, but also greater access to justice, better protection of the public interest, and the advancement of the rule of law.

Engagement with Government

19. With that, I turn to the third and final priority for the term ahead: the importance of continued and meaningful engagement between the Law Society and governmental authorities in the development of laws and regulations.

20. For this, I return to the Society's establishing statute which provides that the Society shall "*assist the Government and the courts in all matters affecting legislation submitted to it, and the administration and practice of law in Brunei Darussalam*³". It is well understood that laws that adhere to the rule of law provides substantial benefits to its people and economy. The rule of law dictates that good laws are laws that are, among other things, prospective, clear and intelligible, not contradictory, must not require the impossible, and is relatively stable over time⁴. Legal practitioners are, in many respects, the daily users of the law who can provide the authorities valuable insight that will assist them in achieving that. Our experience in advising clients, resolving disputes and navigating regulatory frameworks place the profession in a unique position to offer practical and constructive input that will ensure that laws are workable in practice and advance the rule of law. However, early and open engagement is crucial in order for us to be able to provide meaningful assistance and I therefore, invite the relevant authorities to engage with us in good time when intending to introduce and implement new legislation.

21. In this regard, I reaffirm the Society's willingness to assist the Government and the courts in these matters and confirm that the Law Society stands ready to assist, and contribute in good faith, as a

³ Section 4(1)(c) Legal Profession (Law Society of Brunei Darussalam) Order, 2003

⁴ Lon Fuller, *The Morality of Law* (Yale University Press 1969) 38-39, as quoted by Lord Sales in his lecture "What is the rule of law and why does it matter?" at Victoria University of Wellington, 12 December 2024.

professional and independent stakeholder committed to the effective administration of justice.

CONCLUSION

22. My Lord, as the Law Society marks twenty years since its establishment, it is more important than ever, to both reflect and build our resolve for the future. We must learn from the events of the past and continue to steer the Society and the legal profession towards a future where credibility is upheld, members share a united commitment to integrity and professionalism and where effective mutual partnerships are the norm. With these principles and statutory mandate as our guide, I reaffirm the Society's intention to continue serving as custodians of the law in the public interest and to uphold the rule of law for the benefit of the country.

23. I wish the Judiciary, the Attorney Generals' Chambers, the Bar and everyone present a productive, successful and meaningful Legal Year ahead.

24. Thank you.